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THE BRANDED ARROW

CHAPTER 1.

Attacked by Normans.



IT was the splendid month of July. The day was on the wane, and the sun was setting in a glory of gold and crimson, while a cool, gentle breeze was springing up, tempering the sultry heat of the afternoon.

Along the main road that led straight through the great forest of Sherwood, from the Nottingham side right into the heart of Derbyshire, a party of horsemen were making their way. They were seven in number, and one glance at their homespun clothes, long fair hair and blue eyes, showed that they were Saxons.

First of all rode Edwin, son of Thane Alfred, a tall, handsome youth, whose tight-fitting tunic and hose displayed the symmetry of his form. Close behind him came old Leofric and his daughter, Edith, the beauty of Ashburn. Edwin called Leofric uncle, and a warm attachment existed between them; but their relationship was in reality only that of very distant cousins.

Four sturdy varlets, all armed with swords, bucklers, and stout bows, brought up the rear, they

having charge of the sumpter-horses.

"A plague on't!" cried Leofric, riding up beside Edwin, "we shall be belated i' the forest, or I much mistake me."

"What better would you, uncle? 'Twill be a lovely night, and a murrain on the man who craves better bed than the velvety sward under the greenwood tree, such weather as this, I say!"

"For us it matters not; but for my daughter, Edith, I like not the idea."

"We will make her a fairy bower, uncle; and we are enough of us to bid defiance to anyone who would injure us in any way."

"You speak with the impetuosity of youth, Edwin; but you forget the black looks of those Norman dogs in Trent-ham. They cast hungry looks at our horses, and that rascal baron was over bold in his speech to Edith."

Edwin's brow clouded.

"Had I been near," he said, "he had paid dearly for his freedom; my sword should have crammed his base words down his throat."

"Nay, it were better as it is. Gurth threatened him with his sword, and as the churls crowded us, laid about him lustily with his staff."

"A deed for which, by my troth, I shall reward him," cried Edwin.

Leofric, who was a merchant of some repute in Ashburn, had been down to London on a trading expedition, taking his daughter Edith with him, judging she would be safer thus than left in Ashburn with

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an old housewife and some domestics only.

Edwin, whose father lived at Meopham, some twelve miles from Ashburn, had accompanied them, partly to see the capital again, but more so out of love for Edith, to whom he was betrothed.

When passing through Trentham he had been some mile or two behind, at a smithy, his horse having cast a shoe, and had not therefore been a witness of the insulting behaviour of the Normans to his friends.

Edwin had overtaken Leofric and the others when they had left Trentham some miles behind them, and the whole party had then made the best of their way during the day. But the heat had been terrific, and the delay had made them late; hence, instead of reaching Ashburn as they had hoped, they found themselves obliged to pass the night in the great forest of Sherwood.

The sun had by that time set, and the golden light had turned to a pale sheen, which shone through and among the giant oaks and larches. The part of the forest they were then in was hilly, the hills being thickly studded with trees to their summits; and valleys, along which rivulets ran, divided the gentle rises.

The ground was carpeted each side the road with luscious grass, thickly studded with wild flowers, and acres of yellow gorse bushes were visible on either hand. Hares, rabbits, deer—ay, and wolves, too, abounded in the forest, and the streams were full of silvery trout and grayling, while on the uppermost branches of the trees herons built their nests, and the lakes were the homes of myriads of wild ducks and swans.

Just as the last beams of light were disappearing in the west, the party reached a small glade, through which ran a babbling brook. Edwin decided that this was a very suitable spot in which to camp for the night, and old Leofric agreeing, they immediately set about making themselves comfortable.

The varlets dismounted and fastened their horses in a spot where the grass grew thickly, and then with their axes

hewed down some branches, with which Edwin constructed a bower for Edith. The maid was not at all displeased at the idea of spending a night in the forest.

"'Tis so cool and so peaceful. Good Edwin, I would we could always live under these dear, leafy trees, far away from the sight and sound of those black-visaged, harsh-voiced Normans."

"Faith, Edith, I would ask no better fate an you were with me. I could bless the hour that made me outlaw."

A quantity of dry, dead wood had been collected, and soon a cheery fire was blazing, more with a view of keeping away any pack of hungry wolves than for warmth.

Food they had in plenty with them, and the good pasty was washed down with copious draughts of ale by the followers, and with a flask of choice wine by Edwin and Leofric.

"How said you this Norman knight who used you so roughly in Trentham was called, uncle?" asked Edwin.

"I know not his name, Edwin; but on his tunic was worked a silver wolf."

"By the bones of the Confessor! it must have been De Maulac, the Wolf of Blackstone. His castle lies not more than ten miles from this very spot."

Leofric glanced uneasily around him.

"I would we had gone on," he said. "I should feel much more safe an we were behind my walls at Ashburn."

"Nay, uncle, the Wolf of Blackstone cannot harm us here. He would not venture so far into the forest; and, besides, he cannot guess we should pass the night here."

"His look was evil, and his glance, as it fell upon Edith, filled me with dread. I have heard of this De Maulac, and he bears an evil reputation."

"One well deserved, too, for 'tis said his was the hand that robbed the young Prince Arthur of his life upon the Seine after the lion-hearted Hubert de Burgh refused to take the poor young prince's life."

"Ay, 'tis said so; and that De Maulac's master, Prince John, gave him the hand and estates of the poor Lady de Lacy in reward."

"A traitor prince John ever was!"

said Edwin hotly. "False to father, brother, king, and wife."

"Speak not so loud, lad; the very trees have ears, and mayhap some prowling forester may chance to hear your words, when 'twould go hard with all of us."

The meal finished, the party prepared for sleep. The fair Edith had already retired within her bower, after wishing her father and Edwin good-night.

The four men stretched themselves under the trees, and soon Edwin followed their example. Leofric alone remained awake, and he sat for some time gazing at the fire and thinking of days gone by—days when his good dame, Edith's mother, had been alive and times had been more peaceful.

The time wore on, and at last he too dozed, and all was quiet.

A couple of hours passed, when the impatient pawing of the horses awoke Leofric, who started to his feet and listened.

At first all was quiet, then strange noises fell upon his ear. He roused Edwin, then, throwing an armful of dry wood upon the fire, went towards the bower to see that all was well with his daughter.

He had almost reached it, when a bowstring twanged, and an arrow, sped by hand only too true, flew through the air and pierced him in the side. With a loud cry he fell, just as Edwin ran to his assistance.

"Ho, there, men! Treachery!" cried the young man.

The Saxons sprang to their feet, seizing their bows as they did so; a flight of arrows flew in among them, and another man fell to the ground mortally wounded. A rush of feet followed, and a dozen men-at-arms, clad in mail, appeared upon the scene.

"Throw down your arms. Saxon dogs!" cried a huge man, who appeared to be the leader. "Surrender, or you die where you stand!"

"To arms!" cried Edwin. "Stand firm and teach these Norman wolves a lesson."

Next moment an arrow sped from his bow, and the leader, pierced in a vital part, fell to the ground.

Shouting their battle-cry, the other Normans rushed forward to beat their enemies to the ground, but were met with a flight of arrows from the stout yew bows, which pierced armour and jerkin and did considerable damage.

Edith, at the first sound of alarm, had darted from her bower, and stood terrified at the scene before her. Seeing her, the Normans refrained from shooting any more arrows, but with sword and dagger rushed on to the attack.

Closing round the maid, the Saxons met sword with sword, and rained their blows with such effect that the Normans, staggered by the fierce resistance, fell back.

"Quick! To the shelter of the trees!" cried Edwin, dragging the almost fainting Edith with him.

"My father—my father!" she cried. "Where is he? Oh, let me go to him!"

This, however, was impossible, and they retreated, leaving the baggage in the hands of the Norman robbers. These, in a minute, with fierce cries, dashed after their victims, and again the combat raged.

Fierce as was the resistance of the Saxons, they were overpowered by numbers, and gave way step by step. At last only two remained on their feet, Edwin and Gurth. These two stood before the fair Edith and defended her against the Normans who tried to seize her.

At length Gurth went down before a Norman, who cut him over the head, while another ruffian seized the maid and began dragging her away. Her screams rang out piercingly through the darkness of the forest, and Edwin, with the strength of despair, cut and slashed at his enemies in his attempts to get to her.

Several Normans barred his way, and in another moment he, too, would have been overpowered, when there was a sound of rushing feet, and an arrow whistled through the air, piercing the heart of the ruffian who was bearing off the maid. Then came a welcome cry, and Saxon voices shouted:

"Ho, there! A rescue—a rescue! Robin Hood to the rescue! Have at them!"

discussed the matter with Friar Tuck. The latter was of opinion that the circumstance was suspicious, and Edwin determined to go out and see if anyone was prowling in the woods round the house. He had almost given up the quest, satisfied that all was quiet, when he caught a glimpse of the sunshine reflected from a steel cap. He immediately strung an arrow to his bow and advanced towards the spot, but could see no one. He hunted around, and at last was returning to the house, when he saw the form of a man who, from his steel cap and corslet, it was plain was a Norman, trying to peep over the palisade at the back of the house.

Edwin immediately ran towards him, when the man made off, refusing to stop on being called.

Edwin loosed an arrow at him, and the barb struck him fair between the shoulders, but the distance was great, and the point glanced off from the man's back-piece. Before the young Saxon could repeat the shot the man had disappeared.

As Edwin stood a moment anathematising his bad luck and the fact of the man wearing armour, there was a twang, followed by a sharp "zip," and an arrow flew so close to him that it pierced his tunic.

"By the rood!" he muttered, "there is mischief afoot. I must indoors," and he ran in at once, calling out to Gurth to rouse up all the men, then going straight to Friar Tuck.

CHAPTER 3.

An Assault on the House.—A Daring Escape.

THE worthy friar, who was at the moment busily engaged in demolishing a huge pasty, at once decided that the experiences of Gurth and Edwin taken together were extremely suspicious. Measures were at once taken to guard against surprise, and the place was put into a state of defence.

There were in all now eight men and three women, including Edith. There was a goodly supply of arms, especially bows and arrows. The door was securely fastened, and a heap of heavy articles

piled was against the inside of it to strengthen it. Each man was supplied with plenty of arrows, and it was made sure that the chinks in the wall on the ground floor, intended as loopholes for shooting purposes, were all clear.

The women were placed in the centre of the house, and had ointments and bandages ready for those who might chance to get hurt.

The evening wore on, and nothing was heard of any outside force, when Edwin went upstairs to a small room, and, opening the casement, looked out. Friar Tuck, who had been asleep for some time, had roused himself up and was with him.

They were both looking round in the moonlight, when there was a sharp "twang," and an arrow sped so close between them that Edwin's face was brushed with the feathers. He started back with a slight cry of surprise, and the friar drew away, too, keeping in the darkness.

"By St. Dunstan, an that toy had been an inch nearer, you had been now in a sad plight," he growled.

Edwin, though, had fitted an arrow to his bow, and, still keeping in the shadow, was looking out of the window. Presently a man came from behind a tree and gazed up towards the window, as though to discover the result of his shot. He stood in full view for a few moments, and Edwin loosed his arrow. It flew straight to the mark, and struck the man full in the throat. He threw up his arms, gave a shrill cry, and dropped to the ground.

Two more men ran out to pick up their companion, when both Edwin and the friar shot, wounding them both.

The noise of a number of men could now be distinctly heard, and in a minute a shower of arrows rattled against the house, several entering the casement, but doing no harm.

"The Wolf begins to show his teeth!" said Edwin. "Now we shall discover what all this means."

Under cover of the flight of arrows a number of men ran forward towards the door, upon which they began to beat with axes and hammers. The defenders plied them with arrows, and being

favoured by the darkness inflicted a deal of damage without themselves suffering any.

For the present the door resisted all their endeavours to break down, and the attackers were losing a good many men in the attempt. After a time they gave it up, and taking to the woods shot at every casement and loop-hole they could see.

"Methinks this is a harder nut to crack than they thought," said Edwin.

"They will pay a price ere they effect a lodgment here," replied Friar Tuck, "though when daylight comes the advantage will be with them."

"Ere that we or they shall have conquered," answered Edwin.

"By the rood, master, they are bringing up ladders! Look!" cried Gurth.

This was indeed true, for several steel-capped and corsleted men were seen running forward, armed with short ladders.

"Fetch down those men!" cried Edwin, himself going again to the small room from which he had first discovered the Normans.

The enemy, in spite of the fact that several were pierced with arrows, managed to rear one of the ladders against the house. It had been placed against the very casement behind which the young Saxon stood, and soon a man came up.

Edwin had shouted down for someone to help him, and Gurth, armed with a huge double-headed axe, appeared.

The steel cap of the Norman had hardly appeared at the window before the axe fell with a crash upon it. By leaning over, Edwin was enabled to reach a second man with his sword, and the two fell down, knocking over those below them.

Angry shouts arose at this, and several arrows came flying in at the window. One, indeed, pierced Gurth's shoulder, but he pulled out the shaft, and fitting it to his bow shot it back at the enemy.

More men came crowding towards the ladder, but Gurth and Edwin fought like demons, and every head that appeared above the casement was smitten with axe or sword.

The noise of the tumult had attracted Friar Tuck, who, with a huge staff as thick as a man's wrist in his hand, came to see what was going on.

"An the varlets persevere in this attempt," he cried, "we shall soon have them in a heap at the foot of the ladder."

Another lot of Normans came forward armed with torches, which they evidently intended to hurl inside, so as to set the place on fire.

The three Saxons were, however, ready for them, and the flare of the torches lighting up the scene made the men an excellent mark for the arrows of the defenders. The deadly messengers flew among them, the aim of the Saxons being so accurate that the Normans threw away their torches and seized the ladder as though to rear it against some other spot. The friar, however, had caught it in his powerful grasp and hung on to it, pulling with all his strength.

"By the Mass, an you bring not in that great body of yours, you will be transfixed!" cried Edwin. "Let the varlets have their ladder."

"Nay. A plague on them! I will hold on as long as I can grip!" cried Tuck.

"Then lay on, too, Gurth, or we shall pay dearly," cried Edwin; and he himself adding his strength, all three pulled with such a good will that the ladder was wrenched from those below and hoisted in at the window.

As they got it up, however, they found a man still hanging on to the end of it, and he was pulled into the room.

"Ha, dog!" cried Gurth, swinging up his great axe.

"Nay, strike him not, good Gurth," cried Edwin. "I would fain learn somewhat of the meaning of this outrage."

And seizing the Norman before he could attempt to escape Edwin and Friar Tuck had him securely in their grasp. His arms were fastened, and he was taken downstairs into the light.

"Now, sirrah," said Edwin, "what is the meaning of this outrage? Who commands that band of robbers?"

The man made no answer, when the young Saxon cried:

"We know whose men ye are; the murderer De Maulac, the Wolf of Blackstone, set you on; but you shall go back to your master in such wise that you shall give him an uneasy night, I trow."

The Norman took no notice, when Edwin, drawing his dagger, pressed it to the man's breast.

"Speak, dog!" he cried, "or, by the bones of the Confessor, I will plunge the blade into your heart! Have I not spoken the truth?"

The man's face blanched.

"The Baron de Maulac is my master," he said.

"And your companions are his men; is it not so?"

The prisoner nodded his head.

At this moment a trumpet sounded outside. It was clearly a summons, and Edwin looked round at his companions.

Gurth, who had had his wound dressed by Edith and her women, came into the hall and announced that a man in mail, accompanied by a trumpeter, was at the gate asking for a parley.

"I will talk with the man and hear what he has to say," said Edwin.

"And I will bear you company," said Friar Tuck blithely, "for at talking I have never yet met my better."

They ascended to the casement above, and on the trumpet summons being repeated Edwin demanded what the man had to say.

"Unbar the doors and come forth; I would hold a parley," answered the man in mail, who wore a helmet with the visor down.

Edwin laughed.

"You must think we are indeed fools, Sir Robber," he cried. "We can as well talk from here."

"As you will," replied he in armour.

"But I warn you that an you open not yon door, we will beat it in, and when we have effected our purpose will burn the place over your heads."

"I doubt not you would an you could, but you have already spent some time in the attempt, and are now no further than you were."

"Say you so? Then know that I will burn you out like rats from a barn unless within the time a man may walk

a furlong you shall comply with my demands."

"And what are they, Sir Robber?"

"That the youth Edwin, who is the son of that old rebel, Alfred of Meopham, together with the maiden Edith, daughter of the dead Leofric, be immediately delivered up into my custody. Also the old recreant priest, known to be a member of that notorious outlaw Robin Hood's band, and a disgrace to his cloth."

"Now, heard you that?" roared Friar Tuck. "Out upon you, saucy knave! An I were near you, I warrant I'd make thy head ring, spite of the iron pot upon it!"

"The aforesaid priest to be included, that he may be hanged as he deserves in Derby Gaol," concluded the speaker.

"Norman knave," cried Edwin, "we have heard enough. Get you gone, or I shall find a way to help you."

The man in armour continued speaking, taking no heed of this warning speech, when Edwin took his bow in hand and sent a shaft full at the speaker's chest. The barb struck against it with a sharp ring, but fell at the speaker's feet.

"A plague on't!" cried Edwin; "an I had aimed at his face, I might have put an arrow through the holes in his visor; but he wears a corslet of proof steel."

"An I get a chance to reach him with my axe," muttered Gurth, "all the proof armour in the world shall not save his Norman hide."

After that a savage attack was made upon the door, and the defenders had all they could do to harass their enemies and make it so hot for them that at last they desisted, but only to return again and again.

The defenders looked grave. One man was already killed, and two had been wounded with bolts and arrows that had got through the loopholes. It was evident that they could not very much longer hope to keep their foes at bay.

"It is clear that this is the work of De Maulac," said Edwin to Friar Tuck; "and he will spare no effort to complete his rascally task before daylight."

At that moment a man came and reported that a number of the foe were bringing along great armfuls of dried wood, which they were proceeding to pile against one side of the house.

"They mean to burn us out, as they promised," said Edwin; "and if they do, we shall of a surety be in a fix."

They all went to the most advantageous places for observing the movements of the enemy, and as often as a fair shot presented itself an arrow sped on its message of destruction.

So deadly accurate was the aim of the Saxons, and so sharp were their eyes, that for a time it appeared as if the attackers had had enough. They kept among the shadows of the trees, and took good care to keep out of the reach of the winged arrows. But it was certain that the respite would only be for a time, and Edwin racked his brains for a plan whereby he might outwit the Normans.

Of a sudden an idea occurred to him, and he lost no time in communicating it to Friar Tuck. The priest thought favourably of it, and Edwin immediately set about putting it into execution.

"This robber, Baron de Maulac, has set his black heart on obtaining possession of my cousin Edith," said Edwin to the friar; "and on me he intends to wreak vengeance. If we two escaped, I question whether the others would come by any harm."

"Except poor Friar Tuck," quoth the priest.

"You, of course, would come with us; and Gurth must come, too. For the rest, they will be in no great danger."

Friar Tuck agreed to the plan, and immediately preparations were made. Edwin's idea was to mount the swiftest horses in the stables, creep up to the Normans as silently as possible, then cut their way through them and make for the forest, when they must trust to luck.

Edith was to wear a boy's suit, and Friar Tuck was to take charge of her, while Edwin and Gurth rode in advance, and, if necessary, hewed a path for them through the Normans.

By means of a secret door in the back

of the house, access could be gained to the stable; but to leave the stable would be a difficult matter, as the door opened right in front of the position occupied by the Normans. Edwin, however, thought of a plan, and ridding the Norman prisoner of his weapons and armour, the young Saxon put these on, hiding his long, fair hair under the steel cap. He then instructed the men he was leaving behind in charge to hold out as long as they could, promising if he got through the enemy he would ride on to Ashburn, raise the whole Saxon quarter, and bring them back to the rescue. Then he and those who were going to make the essay of cutting through the enemy crept out by the secret door and got into the stable, where silently they saddled four horses.

The Normans were then at some distance from the house, and were preparing for some bold stroke to carry it.

Opening the stable-door, Edwin boldly walked out, and, if seen, was taken for a Norman, for no notice was taken of him. There was no time to lose, though. At a sign from him, Gurth rode out of the stable, leading another horse, and Edwin vaulted into the saddle. Friar Tuck, on a huge animal, with Edith by his side, followed.

Leaving the stable, they all turned sharp to the right, hoping to get right away before they were noticed; but in this they were mistaken. About a score of men, who were busily engaged dragging a huge tree-trunk along, when they saw the fugitives, dropped their burden and, drawing their swords, threw themselves in the way of the horsemen.

"Now for the honour of the Saxons, Gurth!" cried Edwin, drawing his sword and putting spurs to his horse.

"Ay, my weapon is ready to drink their Norman blood," replied Gurth, swinging his terrible axe; and at top speed they charged down upon their foes.

The Normans bore the charge bravely, and though several went down before the shock of the horses the others closed in and made a furious attack upon the Saxons.

Edwin fought with the fury of des-

pair, and Gurth's axe scattered death around as they went further and further through the press.

Suddenly with a bound they were through, and Edwin turned, to find to his joy that the friar and Edith were apparently unhurt.

"Now, away with you to the forest!" cried Edwin. "Gurth and I will keep these wolves in check a minute."

The retainers were running forward shouting: "A De Maulac! a De Maulac!" but the friar was galloping for dear life, taking his fair charge with him, and Edwin and Gurth retreated more slowly, shooting arrows rapidly among the robbers.

At length there was a thud of horses' hoofs, which proved that the Normans had got to their horses and were coming in pursuit.

"We must now trust to our horses," said Edwin. "To fight further were but useless."

So saying, they turned their horses' heads and galloped after the retreating figures of Friar Tuck and Edith, making straight for the forest of Sherwood.

For some distance they managed to keep well ahead, and then Edwin, who was riding a little behind, heard the sounds of the pursuers getting nearer and nearer. He spurred up to the others and said to Friar Tuck:

"The Normans are overtaking us. Gurth and I will tarry behind a little and see if we cannot give these knaves enough trouble to delay them. If we should fall, keep straight on, and hide in the forest until all pursuit shall end."

Thus saying, Edwin and Gurth fell back, and they both kept just a bowshot in front of their pursuers, and every now and then one or other would halt and send an arrow back towards them; but this was dangerous work, as the Normans were always ready to reply, and the two had several narrow escapes.

Thus they kept on for a full hour, and were then many miles in the forest.

As they galloped along, ever and anon Edwin heard a horn wound loudly, and doubted not that it was the friar, who was thus trying to attract the attention of some of the Saxon forest

rovers, who, did they but know what was happening, would no doubt have hastened to the assistance of their countrymen in distress.

At last an untoward accident brought affairs to a crisis. The friar's horse stumbled and threw its rider rather heavily; but he scrambled to his feet, and grasping his staff declared he would go no further, but would fight the matter out.

All drew rein, and a delay of some minutes ensued, during which the Normans got terribly close.

"Let the horses go and take to the woods," cried Edwin, suiting the action to the word.

The others followed his example, but the party had barely time to crouch behind the nearest clump of bushes when several Normans galloped into sight.

Two men-at-arms in advance rode straight for the bushes. They would have ridden right over their quarry, but suddenly one gave a cry and toppled from his saddle, and before his companion could pull up he, too, fell, like his companion, pierced with an arrow from Edwin's bow.

The others, however, came up, and arrows flew on both sides.

Friar Tuck now wound his horn in such a fashion as to make the wood for a mile round ring again.

Then the Normans closed, and a fierce struggle in the dark began. It could only have had one end, though, had there not suddenly rung out an answering call upon a horn.

The friar sounded again, and again the reply came, nearer.

"Lay on, in Heaven's name!" he cried. "Help is at hand."

Edwin and Gurth cut and hewed at the horsemen as they circled round, the horns ringing nearer and nearer. Presently, with a burst, a dozen dark forms sprang into view. The crashing of weapons guided them, and they rushed forward.

"Ho, ho! Saxons to the rescue!" bawled the friar.

"'Tis Tuck's voice," cried someone in ringing tones. "Forward, brave foresters, and strike a blow for liberty!"

The black forms came leaping on, and soon a score of merry men were on the scene, smiting the Norman hard wherever he was to be found.

The men-at-arms, knowing full well what would be their fate if they fell into the hands of Robin Hood's men, soon had enough, and turning their horses' heads they galloped off.

The friar strode up to the leader of the band, and, the day just breaking, recognised him.

"Will Scarlet," he cried, "you were always dear to my heart, but never more so than at this moment. Come, lad, let me embrace you!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Return to Ashburn.

THE first inquiry of Friar Tuck was for Robin Hood, and he learnt that the chief had finished his business at Nottingham and was on his way back to the Derbyshire part of the forest to see how it fared with Edwin. Will Scarlet, with a score of trusty men, had come on in advance to keep Robin posted with whatever should happen.

"And on my word as a man of peace, 'twere lucky you were ahead," said Friar Tuck, "or you had like to have found only the carcasses of some of us."

It was found that three of the Normans were quite dead, and that several more were wounded. Acting on the advice of Edwin, these were despoiled of arms and armour, which, he said, might come in useful. Then removing to some distance, those who had escaped from Ashburn sought some sleep, being much fatigued, while Will Scarlet sent a party of men to scout round in case the Normans should return with reinforcements. Another party he dispatched to meet Robin Hood and tell him what had happened.

Edwin had not been long asleep when the sound of horns and merry voices aroused him, and he found that Robin Hood had arrived. He immediately arose, and found the outlaw chief surrounded by Little John, Much, Scatlock, and others, listening to the tale Will Scarlet was telling.

"How now?" cried Robin, as Edwin

came up. "What is this fresh tale I hear of the tyranny of the Wolf of Blackstone? Is it true that he attacked the house with his men last night? But, there, an it were not true you would not be here."

"It's true as holy writ, good Robin," said Edwin; and he gave some particulars of the fight.

The outlaw's face grew hard and stern.

"By the Mass, that black dog shall pay for all this. 'Tis but another to his long list of crimes. Good Edwin," he added, taking the youth's hand, "I trow you will exact a stern vengeance for this deed!"

"I will not rest till I have done so."

"Then you may rely upon Robin Hood to stand by you."

"And upon Little John," quoth the giant.

"And on me—and me!" said a dozer voice; and Edwin's heart swelled with pride as he looked round at the lusty forms and the gallant faces of the Saxon foresters.

"'Tis time we had breakfast, though," said Friar Tuck, rubbing his eyes. "'Tis ill fighting or marching on an empty stomach."

"Ah, friar," called out Robin Hood, "your stomach will not be denied, happen what may. However, let breakfast be prepared. Ho, there, men, exert yourselves!"

Steaming hot venison collops and huge cuts from meat pasties were soon on the scene, and these, with copious draughts of light ale, formed the breakfast of the party.

During the meal Robin Hood and Edwin had a long talk and arranged their plans.

Edwin, Robin, Will Scarlet, and Little John, with a score of men, were to march at once to Ashburn to see what was happening there, and to deal with De Maulac's men, were any left there.

Gurth, with the friar, was to be left behind with the rest of the men to guard Edith.

The meal over, they started off.

The long, swinging strides of the foresters soon brought them to the con-

finer of the forest, when it was thought advisable that only a few should go forward, the rest keeping within sound of Robin Hood's horn, which would bring them to his assistance if they were required.

Keeping a sharp lookout, they advanced towards the house of Leofric. On their way they passed a potter and two Norman horse-boys, but they all gave Robin and his party a wide berth.

As they got nearer the sharp nose of Robin caught the smell of burning, and he strained his eyes in the direction of the house.

Soon they came in sight of it, and then Robin's suspicions were confirmed. Smoke was still issuing from it, and it was clear it had been fired. They all hurried forward, signs of devastation appearing on all sides.

Edwin uttered a cry of rage as the sad sight met his gaze. The garden at the back was all beaten and broken down, the outhouses were burnt level with the ground, and the large house was simply a heap of charred and smoking ruins.

"'Tis a fortunate thing that Edith sees not this devil's work," said Edwin.

"And 'tis a fortunate thing we do see it," added Robin Hood sternly, "else had we not believed such things were done in this Merry England of ours."

"By my soul!" growled Little John, "those trees bear strange fruit! See there!"

All looked at one of a clump of beech trees that grew behind the house, where from a bough that grew out horizontally the body of a man, suspended by the neck, was waving mournfully in the wind.

Edwin went over and looked at the man.

"'Tis Till, an old, trusty servant," he cried, "whose father served my uncle's father. He was wounded in the attack."

"And then was strung up like a dog," said Little John.

The charred body of an old woman was also found, which Edwin concluded to be that of the old housekeeper.

"This deed cries out for vengeance,"

he cried, "and I call on Heaven to witness that I will bring that black-hearted villain De Maulac to account for it."

"I think we had best first go into Ashburn and learn from the gossips there the news, then all will return to the forest and make arrangements for further mounts," said Robin Hood; "but we must first adopt some disguise."

They returned to the others, and then Robin Hood put on a ragged gown over his Lincoln green and hid his bow beneath it; he then blacked his face and put on a tattered hat, while Little John assumed the robe and cowl of a priest. Edwin required no disguise, and after arranging with their foresters that they were to keep within sound of Robin's horn, they started off.

They reached the town, and noticed that in the Saxon quarters men were clustered together talking eagerly, but with gloomy looks; while the women, with scared faces, moved quickly along the streets. A tanner carrying a hide came along and stared at the strangers.

"Peace be with thee, my son," said Little John, in his assumed character.

"And a blessing on you, father," replied the man.

"Why do you wear such sorrowful faces?" asked Little John. "One would think it was a fast day."

"Black deeds have been done, father," replied the tanner. "Our good friend Leofric was done to death not long since, and last night his house was burnt and all the men either killed or cast into prison, and the sweet Mistress Edith killed or carried away."

"And who did this deed?"

"Who but a band of Norman soldiers? They came in here this morning with such a clatter, bringing in the prisoners, that they roused the town."

"And whose men were they?" asked the priest.

"'Tis said they were—no, 'tis not safe to mention his name, for he is hand and glove with our sheriff, who hates all Saxons."

The man then suddenly caught sight of Edwin, when he started back.

"In Heaven's mercy; is't you, fair

sir? I had thought you dead with the rest of them."

"No," replied Edwin, who knew the tanner well. "I escaped, and Mistress Edith is safe, but the others, I fear, are in sad guise."

From the tanner it was learnt that some men-at-arms had come in early, bringing with them prisoners, who had been immediately lodged in the gaol.

"We will get further on," said Robin Hood. "We shall attract attention talking here. Let us to the gaol and see what chance there is of liberating the prisoners."

They made their way to the strong building, which was a one-storey edifice, of which a man named Merkyn was custodian. They were taking in the various points of the prison, with which, however, Edwin was well acquainted, when two men, wearing on their tunics the badge of the hated De Maulacs, came swaggering along.

After stopping to speak to Merkyn they came on, and one, seeing by his dress that Edwin was a Saxon, pushed rudely against him.

"How now, hog?" cried the young man warmly. "An you mind not your manners, you are like to get your nose slit."

"Pig of a Saxon!" retorted the Norman, who by his dress was a superior sort of retrainer. "You shall lodge with the other cattle, and in the morning shall swing with them."

He advanced as though to seize Edwin, but the latter laid his hand on his sword.

Robin Hood and Little John were on the opposite side of the road, the three having deemed it wiser not to be found all together.

The retainer, seeing Edwin's action, drew his own sword.

"Cockerel!" he cried, "dare you to draw steel on me?"

"I dare to draw steel on any man who lays hand on me," said Edwin.

"Ho, there, warders!" shouted the man. "Seize me this saucy varlet."

"By the Virgin!" cried the other man-at-arms, "this is the very stripping our master wants. I recognise him now."

Edwin now saw that this second man was the very one he had noticed prowling about Leofric's house the day before. He attempted to pass the two, not deeming it wise to enter into a quarrel right in the centre of the town and close to the sheriff's house. But the man who had already drawn his sword barred the way.

"Not so fast, my Saxon crower," he cried. "Methinks you are one I am anxious to meet."

In reply Edwin drew his own sword and cried fiercely:

"Stand aside, or I warrant you I'll cram more steel down your throat than you can swallow."

The Norman made a pass at him, and he who had recognised him slipped round behind Edwin, and, drawing his dagger, was about to plunge it into his back, when Robin Hood, who had seen the danger from the first, saw it was time to interfere.

He had drawn his bow from under his tunic, and just as the Norman raised his dagger to strike he loosed the shaft. The arrow flew straight and true, and took the man in the throat just above the breast-plate.

The execution had been so sudden that Edwin knew nothing till he heard the clang of the man falling on the stones at his feet. He turned to see what had happened, when the other man, rushing upon him, aimed a blow at him which would have cloven his skull in twain had not Edwin caught the blow on the strong part of his sword. He then attacked the Norman in turn, and, being skilful at fence, pressed him back until the man, in overreaching himself in a lunge, exposed himself, and Edwin got the point of his sword in under his right arm and inflicted a fatal wound.

The noise of the contest had brought several people around, and Merkyn, the gaoler, had started loudly ringing the alarm bell.

Several people armed with stones came running up to know what had happened, and some of the sheriff's men, seeing the two Normans lying on the ground, turned fiercely upon the three strangers.

They were soon beset by a threatening crowd, and were getting jostled about, when Little John suddenly drew from under his gown a stout stave, with which he belaboured all those close to him.

"Ho, ho, there, comrades!" cried a man. "The priest has a concealed weapon. I fear he is an arrant rogue."

At the same time someone pulled Robin Hood's ragged cloak and tore it from his shoulders, when he stood revealed in Lincoln green.

"A forester!" shouted several voices, when one, who had probably seen Robin Hood, shouted: "It is the outlaw himself! Ho, there! fetch the sheriff's men, and one thousand marks will be ours!"

"By the rood, we must bestir ourselves, or we shall be caught like rats in a trap," growled Little John; then whirling his staff round his head, he bawled: "Way there, you varlets, way! Would you dare lay hands upon a son of holy Mother Church?"

And half a dozen went down before his blows with broken pates.

Robin Hood had now drawn his sword, and Edwin joined them. In this fashion they strode along towards the Saxon quarter, keeping their foes at bay as a stag keeps a pack of snapping curs.

Stones and other missiles began to be thrown, and it was lucky the crowd was so close, or arrows might have been shot. In any case things were beginning to wear a very serious aspect when Robin saw they had reached the Saxon quarter.

"To the rescue, friends!" he cried, "an you would not see us dragged off to prison for slaying two Normans in fair fight. Help us against these varlets!"

"To the rescue!" cried Little John, in his great voice. "'Tis Robin Hood that calls you!"

At this magic name the men came tumbling out, armed with staves and cudgels, and soon a fierce riot was in progress. Amongst the Normans were many armed with swords, and nasty wounds were given and received.

"We must get out of the town," cried Edwin, "and leave the people to settle the dispute among themselves."

"And, by the rood, the Saxons will

have the better of it," said Little John, who could not resist getting into the thick of the fray and wielding his weapon with terrible effect.

The Normans fell back, and the trio made at top speed for the city gates, when a clatter of hoofs was heard, and several mounted men were seen coming down the street.

"'Tis the sheriff and his men!" cried Robin Hood.

Reaching the gates a minute later, the fugitives dashed through and slammed them to just as the sheriff and his men came galloping up.

"Our legs must serve us now," cried Robin Hood, "for soon we shall have the whole pack at our heels."

Robin Hood and his followers made a great effort, and fortunately reached the forest before they could be overtaken.

CHAPTER 5.

A Brilliant Rescue.

No sooner had Robin Hood rejoined his men than all at once started for the spot where Friar Tuck and the rest of the foresters were guarding Edith.

When the loss of her father's house was announced to the girl she took it very coolly, much more so than she did the announcement that all those of poor Leofric's people who had not been killed were lodged in gaol.

In those days offenders of all sorts were very summarily dealt with, and Saxons in particular received scant consideration. The very fact of their having resisted Norman authority—or tyranny—was sufficient to justify their suffering the extreme penalty, and that was death. Doubtless the poor fellows would all die on the morrow or the next day, and it was this sorrowful fact that formed the subject of conversation as the foresters partook of their afternoon meal, which the friar had prepared.

Edwin and Robin Hood discussed the matter, and Will Scarlet, who was burning for a chance of action, suggested that a rescue should be attempted.

"I should like to make the attempt well enough," said Edwin, "and if I had a dozen trusty fellows I believe it could be done."

"A dozen good fellows you can have, and that right willingly," said Robin Hood, "and I myself will lead them."

"Where you go I go," cried Little John, and the others echoed his statement.

"There will be no lack of men, I can see," said Edwin with a laugh. "But how shall we set about it?"

"That I will consider," said Robin Hood. "I have a plan which, if it could be carried out, would get us all into Ashburn without raising any suspicion, for, of course, to go in undisguised is out of the question."

Details were gone into, and soon all was arranged.

Within an hour Robin Hood, Will Scarlet, Little John, Edwin, and six trusty men started off, all disguised as peasants, but having arms concealed about their persons. All were mounted, and after giving Friar Tuck instructions about protecting the encampment the rest turned towards Ashburn.

That evening, just before the curfew bell announced that all fires and lights must be extinguished and all gates closed, a wagon, drawn by two horses and loaded with faggots of wood, drove up to the main gate of Ashburn. The driver was a stolid-looking peasant, who cracked his short whip and urged his horses forward.

"Now, lazy-bones, an you want not to stay outside the town all night, you had best hasten," said the surly gatekeeper.

"Marry, good sir, I come as fast as my horses can move," replied the carter.

He managed to get inside the gates before they were closed, and stopped just inside while the custodian locked and bolted them.

"'Tis over-late for such traffic," he said, surlily. "I doubt not you are going to those pestilent knaves who made that riot to-day. A murrain on them all; an they had their deserts, a full score of them would hang with the other knaves who suffer at sunrise."

"Ah, and is there to be an execution to-morrow?" asked the carter.

"Truly there is; an you are here to see it, I promise you some sport," chuckled the porter as he entered his lodge.

The wagon went on until it came to a cobble-paved yard, where the market wagons stood, and here the carter gave his horses a handful of hay each, then sat himself down on the wagon as though to sleep. No sooner was all quiet, however, than he arose, tapped against the billets of wood, some of which he moved, when from underneath them a man emerged. He was followed by another and another, and finally a huge fellow got out and shook himself like a great dog.

"I crave not another such ride," he growled. "Two more miles in that, and Little John were a dead man."

"Hush!" replied the driver, who was none other than Robin Hood. "Speak not so loud, you mountain of flesh, or we shall have some of those long-eared knaves upon us before we are ready for them."

The other two, who were Will Scarlet and Much the Miller's son, got down and sat round the wagon, when Robin Hood began to whistle a lively air.

Soon a Norman soldier, who wore the wolf of De Maulac on his breast, came along whistling the same tune. At a sign from Robin Hood, he crossed and spoke to the wagoners.

"Good even, friends," he cried. "You have a good load there."

"Ay, and we trust soon to have a better," growled Little John.

Seeing that all was quiet, Robin Hood whispered:

"Goes everything right, Edwin?"

"Yes," replied the Norman, who was Edwin in disguise, "we all got in at the other gate without any accident, and the men are in hiding round the gaol."

"Everything favours the attempt, it would seem," cried Robin Hood. "Now, Little John, bring forth the provisions, and let us refresh ourselves, for we shall have work for our hands this night."

Some food having been eaten and light ale drunk, they strolled away, and the foresters who were in hiding came singly up to the wagon and ate, then returned to their posts.

By that time it was deemed late enough to put their plan into execution. It had been originally arranged that Edwin was to try to get into the gaol

and ply Merkyn with strong drink; but the surly old man had shown so little complaisance that the attempt had been abandoned.

A different plan was thought out and now put into execution.

The men got back again into the wagon, and Robin Hood drove his horses up to the gaol. Edwin, in his disguise as a Norman, preceded it, and reaching the gaol, hammered loudly on the gate with the hilt of his sword. For a long time there was no response, then a surly voice cried out:

"Who, in the fiend's name, is hammering at this time of night?"

"One whom you will do well to attend to," answered Edwin. "Open at once; I have an important message for you."

"Get thee gone, or I am liker to lay thy head open than the door!" growled Merkyn.

"Impudent old churl!" cried Edwin, feigning anger, while in reality he was all excitement. "An you open not at once, my master will come himself, and then I wot you will suffer for it."

"And who is your master, boaster?"

"The Baron de Maulac, who even now sups with the sheriff. By the Mass, an you obey not his order, I will at once back to him and report that you defy him; when if your hide be not well tanned, my name is not Roger."

There was still some hesitation, when Edwin, pretending to lose all patience, cried out:

"Comrade, go at once to our lord and tell him what this old churl says."

Little John, who was chuckling to himself in the background, made as though to obey, when Merkyn cried out:

"Tarry yet a moment. What may be your business with me, an I let you in?"

"I have a message for you. My master wants the prisoners brought before him, and my men are here for that purpose."

"He can squeeze no money out of them," said Merkyn. "They have nothing."

"I'll warrant me you have already squeezed them well," cried Edwin. "But open at once. I am sick with your chatter!"

There was a momentary pause, then Merkyn disappeared, and presently the sound of bars and bolts being undone caught the ears of those without, and the heavy door was opened a little way.

Edwin passed in, and Merkyn was just about to close the door when Little John threw himself at it and sent it flying inwards.

Before Merkyn could utter a sound he was caught by the throat and held while Robin Hood and the rest, who had been with the wagon, rushed in.

Some of the men remained outside to give timely warning of any interruption.

Once having entered, Robin Hood closed and locked the door, while Little John and Will bound and gagged Merkyn, who, when he saw the fierce faces of those around him, trembled and shook as with the palsy.

They took the old man's keys from him, and reaching down the torch which was sticking in an iron socket they went off to the cells.

One or two that they opened were empty, but at last groans were heard coming from one, and on opening the door several people were seen to be lying on the bare ground.

Edwin ran in, and at once saw that they were all of them dependants of his uncle. One of the men had a nasty sword wound in his head, and groaned with the pain; but the other two, one man and one woman, were apparently unhurt.

Edwin soon told them what had happened, and Little John came down to help them get rid of their fetters. This took some time and made considerable noise. While they were thus engaged two gaolers, armed with swords, came down the stone stairs to see what was going forward.

Seeing a light, they entered the dungeon, but were immediately set upon by Robin Hood and Will; and when the poor prisoners had been released from their fetters the two gaolers were fastened with them, and after Little John had given each a sounding thwack over the head—"just to make them sleep," as he expressed it—they all left the cell, locking the door after them.

The man with the wounded head had to be carried, but the others were able to walk.

They got outside to the wagon, and the prisoners were concealed under the pieces of timber, when, carefully locking the prison door, Robin Hood, elated with the success of the enterprise, started his horses once more towards the gate of the town.

The clatter of the wheels on the stones at that hour of the night roused a considerable amount of curiosity, though, and many a head was thrust from door and window.

"A murrain on this noisy wagon!" said Little John. "An it clatters like this we shall rouse the town."

"And the sheriff to boot," cried Will Scarlet. "Shall I not hurry on to the gate and ensure it being opened?"

"I think 'twere as well," replied Robin Hood. "And do you, good Edwin, go with him. Tell that knave porter that if he does not open at once he'll mayhap meet trouble in the shape of a broken head."

"Nay, an heads are to be broken, I must needs be there," quoth Little John; and he hurried on after Edwin and Will.

They reached the porter's house, and found it was all quiet and that the doors were bolted.

Edwin knocked loudly several times before he got an answer, but at last the surly custodian thrust a night-capped head from the lattice above.

"How now? What means this hubbub?" he cried.

"Come down and open at once!" replied Edwin. "We are on important business for the sheriff."

"That were a lie, I doubt me not," said the man. "I had express orders to let no one out before sunrise."

"Take care how you thwart him! See, I am one of the right noble Baron de Maulac's men. I am not used to being trifled with!"

"I care naught for the baron. The sheriff is my master, and him I obey."

"An you come not down, I will break in the door!" shouted Little John.

The porter seemed to recognise the voice, for he cried of a sudden:

"Ah, methinks you are a parcel of Saxon traitors! Ho, there, comrades! arouse ye! Here be a parcel of knaves trying to leave the town!"

"Cease your bawling, or, by the rood, I'll put an end to you!" cried Edwin.

But the man only shouted the louder.

"Ho, there, neighbours! Awake! Here is treachery! Call the sheriff!"

At the same moment the wagon came rumbling along, and the man was now more convinced than ever that treachery was intended. He redoubled his cries as Robin Hood came running up.

"We must silence that fellow, or all will be lost!" cried the outlaw chief. "In with the door!"

He and Edwin hammered at it, but Little John, bidding them stand aside, hurled his huge frame against it, when, with a crash, the door burst from its very hinges.

"Hurrah!" cried Robin Hood. "Now we shall soon be in."

He and Edwin completed the work, when soon the door was sufficiently forced to allow of their entry. Up rushed Edwin and Robin Hood, being met on the stairs, however, by a stout fellow who barred their progress. Edwin gave him a stroke with his sword and felled him to the boards, and soon they reached the room in which the porter was, his voice being audible as he continued to bawl out.

The door was quickly burst in, and though his wife set up a great screaming, Robin Hood seized the man by the throat and threatened him with instant death if he did not at once deliver up the keys.

These were obtained, when just as the foresters were rushing down the stairs a great clattering of horses' hoofs was heard below, and it was seen that the sheriff, with several followers, had arrived upon the scene. They had been to the gaol, and not being able to get in had guessed something was wrong, when, hearing the porter's outcry, they had hurried towards the gates.

Little John's voice could be heard as Robin Hood and Edwin got again into the street, while the other foresters were closing round the horsemen.

"Down with the sheriff!" cried Little John.

The sheriff was calling out to his men to seize all who were present, vowing they were all traitors. He had drawn his sword, and, with his men, was striking right and left.

Robin Hood, seeing this, drew his weapon and attacked the man nearest to him, just as Little John with his staff gave the sheriff a blow which brought him to the ground, and the rest of the outlaws, following his example, beat the sheriff's men from the gates.

Then Robin Hood and Will Scarlet with the keys undid the great lock and slid back the bolts.

The gates being thrown open, the wagon passed out, and Robin Hood, seeing all his men safely out, followed last, locking the gates behind him. One of his men had been rather badly wounded, and he had to be placed in the wagon. Then the whole made off as quickly as they could, and, reaching the spot where the horses had been hidden, went at the top of their speed towards the forest.

CHAPTER 6.

Edwin's Rash Resolve.

By the time the rescue party had reached their camp it was broad daylight, and Friar Tuck was already about, superintending the preparation of the morning meal.

As the men, tired with the exertions of the night, threw themselves under the shade of the leafy trees, they related their adventures to their companions who had been left behind; and then, a substantial meal having been eaten, Robin Hood decided that they had better retreat further into the forest, as there would sure to be a pursuit from Ashburn after them.

The woman prisoner who had been rescued from the gaol was Edith's maid Ellen, and she and her mistress, as they met, greeted one another most affectionately.

From the man who had been rescued it was learnt that after Edwin had drawn off the majority of the Normans, when he escaped from his uncle's house,

the inmates had enjoyed a respite for awhile, but that in the morning the defeated men-at-arms had rejoined their companions who had been left to guard the place. Then, acting under the direction of the man in mail, who, the man asserted, was De Maulac himself, the house had been set on fire, when, to save themselves from being burnt to death, the inmates had rushed out, being assured of their lives if they surrendered.

Once in the hands of their enemies, though, they had been cruelly treated, and De Maulac had vowed he would hang every mother's son of them.

The Saxons who were too badly wounded to be moved had been strung up to the nearest tree, and the old housekeeper, being badly burnt, had been struck over the head and cast back into the flames by the baron's orders.

"He shall suffer for that atrocity," said Edwin, grinding his teeth. "I will know no peace till the black-hearted wolf is punished."

On the prisoners being taken into Ashburn, the sheriff had them cast into gaol and condemned them all to be hanged next morning at sunrise without any shadow of a trial.

"He will be disappointed for once," cried Little John. "I only wish I had known all that had happened when I gave him that rap over the head by the gate. I would have put such a force into the blow that I trow he had never wanted another."

"Never mind; his time will come," cried Robin Hood. "Now we must march; we are not sufficiently strong to court an engagement with De Maulac and the sheriff's men, but when we reach the rest of my band, and the women are placed in safety, we will return and exact a terrible vengeance."

They reached Robin Hood's camp, which he called The Glade, in safety, and here were Marian and her several attendants.

Edith was made extremely welcome, and at night a feast was held in celebration of the safe return of Robin Hood and his followers.

Several plans for the punishment of De Maulac were suggested, but Edwin

did not agree in all things with any of them. De Maulac had been guilty of a gross breach of the peace, and Edwin determined to have him punished legally, being resolved to bring the case before Prince John himself.

Robin Hood, who had had a vast experience in such matters, smiled rather sadly, and advised the young Saxon that, if he really wanted justice, he would be much more likely to get it by taking the law into his own hands, as when it came to an issue between Saxon and Norman there was very little chance of justice being done to the former.

However, Edwin was determined to make the attempt, and announced his intention of returning to his father's house, and from thence going up to the prince in London, or wherever he might be, and demanding that De Maulac might be brought to book for his crimes.

"As you will," replied the outlaw, "though I fear that you will get scant attention, and are more likely to find yourself in one of the dungeons of Blackstone Castle than to get any satisfaction out of its master.

When Edith heard of her lover's determination she said she would go with him, and though Marian begged her to stay with them in the forest till the young man should return, she resolutely refused. Accordingly Edwin, with Edith and their followers, prepared to depart. Robin Hood said that, with his principal leaders and a band of fifty men, he would escort them as far as the Derbyshire confines of the forest, and that then he would wait to see what came of Edwin's attempt.

Early next day they started, and in due time came to that part of their journey where Robin Hood said he must leave them, and the young Saxon, after an affectionate farewell of the outlaw, prepared to go on to his father's house, which was some twenty-five miles further on.

Meanwhile, De Maulac, infuriated at the non-success of his designs, and more than ever intent, first on carrying off Edith to his castle, and, secondly, on being revenged on Edwin, had sent out spies in all directions to get news of the

movements of the victims of his villainy.

One of these men, disguised as a beggar, had seen the arrival of the party at the place where Robin Hood was going to part with his friends, and, after assuring himself that it really was Edwin and the maiden Edith, had hurried away to the spot where a confederate was watching, and had sent word to De Maulac of the success of his mission.

The baron was overjoyed, and dispatched a body of men to attack and make prisoners of the whole party, when he promised himself a choice revenge.

Meanwhile the little party continued their way towards Meopham. Their way led through a small village named Mersdale, which lay only about ten miles from Blackstone Castle.

For some time Edwin debated whether he should not make a detour to avoid passing through the village, but to do so would have made their journey so much longer as to preclude all possibility of their reaching Meopham that night. So, not anticipating any danger, they went on and soon entered the village.

Edwin noticed as they passed along that there were a good number of sturdy-looking fellows about, and that they glanced curiously at the cavalcade; but no notice was taken of them till they came opposite the only inn the village possessed.

The sign of the inn was "The Stag's Head," and as the clatter of the horses' hoofs was heard, mine host, a short, bandy-legged individual, came running out. With many smiles and smirks he begged the travellers to alight and take a cup of wine.

"Nay, good host, we must not tarry; we are in haste."

"But the fair lady—who, by the Conqueror! is a comely maid—surely she would like to rest a brief space. At the back there is a leafy arbour that would repay a visit."

The man appeared so pressing, and, moreover, gave Edwin such a curious look, that the young Saxon thought it would look suspicious not to assent, so

he gave the word, and they all dismounted. Refreshments were brought, and Edith with Edwin sat awhile in the arbour at the back of the house, enjoying the cool breeze and the delightful scene.

All the while they were there, though, Edwin was conscious of a feeling of uneasiness, and kept his eyes roving about.

While Gurth was drinking in the tap-room, Edwin noticed the host whispering to a lad who looked like his son, and this boy, with a knowing look on his face, presently went to the stable, saddled a horse, and galloped away.

There was something about this which the young Saxon did not like, and giving Gurth a sign he announced his intention of at once departing. The host made all sorts of excuses to try to delay them, but this only made Edwin the more determined to go at once, so paying the reckoning, and throwing the host a noble for himself, he helped Edith into her saddle, when they all mounted and continued their way.

"Good even, fair sir—good even," cried the host, as, cap in hand, he stood at the gate. "'Tis a lovely evening for your ride, and I wish you a pleasant journey."

When the party were out of hearing the man broke into an ugly grin.

"Saxon rooster," he muttered, "your journey will be pleasant indeed, an my good son Robbie makes not a bungle of my message. You shall have merry company, and the maid shall this night see again the sign of 'The Stag's Head.'"

CHAPTER 7.

A Disastrous Ambuscade. — A Bold Accusation.

Edwin could not get rid of an uneasy feeling that all was not as it should be. He was dangerously near to Blackstone Castle, and he knew that if De Maulac had the slightest suspicion of his presence he would send out a troop of men to kill or capture the whole party. There was a treacherous look about the host of "The Stag's Head" that he did not like.

Edwin communicated his fears to

Gurth, and they took all precautions against surprise. Edith and Ellen were placed in the middle of the party; Gurth rode on ahead, and Edwin, with the other Saxons, rode close behind. In this fashion they went on, until the slanting rays of the sun showed it was on the point of setting.

Suddenly Gurth was seen to stop, after shading his eyes with his hand; then he came trotting back.

"Master," he cried, "in that wood yonder I will swear I saw the glint of the sun on a steel cap."

Edwin trotted forward and peered among the dark foliage, but could distinguish nothing.

"You must have been mistaken," he cried, "but I will soon make sure," and taking his bow he sent a couple of arrows whistling into the wood.

No sound followed, and Gurth thought he must have been mistaken. They closed up and went forward, when suddenly Edwin heard the neigh of a horse.

"To arms!" he cried. "Send your arrows into the wood."

Instantly three arrows flew among the trees, and they were preparing to shoot again when the ring of crossbows was heard and a dozen barbs came flying viciously out.

The man by Edwin went down, pierced through the heart, and the young Saxon himself fell heavily to the ground, his horse having been shot in the chest. He disentangled himself from the animal and got on his feet, drawing his sword at the same moment.

Half a dozen fully-armed men were bounding down rapidly upon them from the woods.

Gurth was already engaged with four, and Edwin saw him beaten on to his knees, when several men, throwing themselves upon him, at once made him prisoner.

The screams of Ellen made the glade ring again as several men tore her and her mistress from their saddles. The sight drove Edwin to frenzy, and he dashed forward to his fair cousin's assistance, but he was outnumbered, and, just as he had passed his sword through the body of a man who wore the wolf of De Maulac on his tunic, he received a

crushing blow with a mace from behind, and, with a groan, sank to the ground, as if dead.

For hours Edwin lay where he had fallen. The night was far advanced when he came to his senses, aching in every limb and soaked with the dew, which had fallen heavily. For a few minutes he could not recollect what had happened, and raised himself slowly and painfully on his elbow. The sight of his dead horse, and then of the Saxon who had been slain at the very beginning of the attack, brought back the facts to his memory.

It was clear he must have fallen into an ambush, which had been laid by De Maulac's men. The attack had been most successful. Edwin himself was so badly hurt that he had been left on the ground for dead, and Edith, with Ellen and Gurth, carried off. There was little doubt where they had been taken to, and Edwin groaned aloud in bitterness of spirit as he thought of their fate in Blackstone Castle.

The morning wore on, and the young Saxon managed to drag himself to a little brook, at which he slaked his burning thirst, for he suffered torments through his great loss of blood. The cold night air had congealed the blood on the wound on his head, and had probably saved his life by preventing him from bleeding to death.

Towards middle day two peasants, driving a couple of donkeys, came along, and by faintly moving his arm Edwin was enabled to attract their attention. They happened to be a cowherd and his son, and the young Saxon told them of his plight and begged them to assist him.

The elder man, whose name was John Cobble, scratched his head as he looked round and saw the signs of strife, and seemed very disinclined to have anything to do with the affair, but the younger Cobble, David by name, said it was a shame to leave a wounded man in such a plight, and so they agreed to do what they could.

The Cobbles lived in a small cottage about a mile away, and here Edwin was taken. Dame Cobble washed and dressed his wound, and then some broth

was given him, after which he fell into a deep sleep.

It was night when he awoke, feeling all the better for his treatment. He implored John Cobble to bury the body of the Saxon who had been killed, and not to say anything about his having taken him in, unless he were obliged to.

This the man agreed to, and Edwin felt that if he could remain undisturbed where he was for a day or two, he would be able to get back to Robin Hood, who would no doubt advise him as to what was best to be done.

By the end of three days he was able to get about again, and on the fourth morning after rewarding the Cobbles for their assistance and fidelity he started off on foot, as yet hardly certain of what he should do next.

David said he would travel with him, and so they went, Edwin disguised like a cowherd, but having a good dagger concealed under his smock, and carrying a stout staff.

They made first for Blackstone Castle, and by noon had reached it. Edwin surveyed the strong towers and walls and the massive keep, and his heart sank within him, for he thought that, whoever might be prisoner inside, there was little chance of his effecting a release without he had a powerful body of men at his back.

As they were gazing up at the thick walls, one of the scullions was seen to cross the drawbridge and come towards them. Edwin determined to enter into conversation with this fellow, and as he approached gave him good-day.

The man replied, and the young Saxon asked the name of the castle.

"That," replied the man, "why, verily you must be a stranger to these parts not to know that it's Blackstone Castle, the residence of the most noble Baron de Maulac."

"Indeed," replied Edwin; "and is the baron at the castle now?"

"Why, no," replied the man; "he is with the prince at Ashburn. Have you not heard of the great tournament that is to be held there next week?"

"Something of this I have heard; but I come from a distant part of the country."